

A photograph of a garden scene. In the foreground, there is a bush of pink roses and several yellow calla lilies. In the background, a large, mature tree with dense green foliage stands prominently. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Light

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One Bible

Heaven is not the promised reward for righteousness

I WENT TO visit a client recently. He was one of those people that you know instinctively is not at all religious. But he used a phrase that I really noticed, knowing that I was due to write this article. Describing someone's honesty, he said: 'John's definitely going to heaven, John is . . .'

This sort of casual remark illustrates very effectively just how deep-rooted is the notion that if you are good, you go to heaven when you die. Given how long the established churches have been promoting this as fundamental teaching, we shouldn't be surprised. But just what **are** the grounds for us twentieth-century realists believing that heaven is the eternal destiny for the souls of the great and the good? Having read the title of this article, you will not be shocked to learn that, in our carefully considered opinion, there are none.

I accept that if you approach the Bible superficially with the preconception that we go to heaven when we die, it will be possible to come across a few verses that, ignoring their context, may appear to support heaven-going as the reward for righteousness. However, the purpose of this article is to show beyond all doubt that to *accept* heaven-going is to contradict and deny:

- (a) the clear teaching of a large number of indisputable verses, and
- (b) other doctrines fundamentally essential to the Bible's message.

AN APPEAL TO LOGIC . . .

Most important among these doctrines that we have to *logically reject* if we persist with the fallacy of heaven-going are:—

1. The resurrection
2. The second coming of Jesus Christ
3. The mortality of man
4. The Kingdom of God on earth

Let's briefly think about each of these in turn.

HEAVEN-GOING AND THE RESURRECTION

The Bible quite clearly teaches that true Christians expect to be raised from the grave when Jesus comes back.

'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept . . . but every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's **at his coming** . . . for the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.'¹

' . . . for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation.'²

The notion that the souls of the good go winging away to heaven after death completely contradicts these words of the apostle Paul and those of Jesus Christ himself.

HEAVEN-GOING AND THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

All of these doctrines which we are briefly reviewing in the light of clear Bible teaching are inextricably and logically intertwined. The verses quoted above primarily to prove the resurrection also require Christ to come again, because that is when the resurrection will take place. To these we can add:

'This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.'³

'For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he shall reward every man according to his works.'⁴

Why on earth should Jesus need to come back if we are all supposed to be heading heavenwards at death?

HEAVEN-GOING AND THE IMMORTAL SOUL

Even if you think you can somehow get around the points made above, it cannot be denied that (if it can be shown that man does not in fact have an immortal soul) the idea of heaven-going for the righteous after death becomes impossible to sustain.

¹1 Corinthians 15.19,20,23,52 ²John 5.28 ³Acts 1.11 ⁴Matthew 16.27

The Bible does not teach anywhere that man has any characteristics of immortality. On the contrary, it states that man is mortal, that when he dies he ceases to exist, his body and brain (the cause of his emotions and personality) decomposing to dust. In case you're sceptical consider a few further passages:

'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground . . . for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.'⁵

'For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts . . . as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast . . . all go unto one place; all are of the dust; and all turn to dust again.'⁶

'What man is he that liveth and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?' [a rhetorical question to which [the context shows] David knew the answer was 'No'].⁷

'Soul' is an archaic word which usually simply means 'living being' or is a reference to man's thinking capacity, personality or emotional state. You will search the Bible in vain for a reference to 'immortal soul'. In fact there are several passages which show that a soul, far from being immortal is able to die or be destroyed:

' . . . the soul that sinneth, it shall die.'⁸

' . . . fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body . . .'⁹

Even a little research will show that the doctrine of the immortal soul was imported from paganism and was not believed by the early church. This fact is acknowledged by honest scholars from the established churches, though amazingly they don't proceed to follow the obvious course that arises from this discovery — the discarding of this erroneous doctrine!

To illustrate what the first century Christians believed concerning what happens after death, think about what the apostle Peter clearly stated about King David, someone described in the Bible as '*a man after God's own heart*'. Surely David would have been a prime candidate to enter the supposed pearly gates of heaven, if indeed that is the reward of the righteous!

' . . . let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre [tomb] is with us unto this day . . . For David is not ascended into the heavens . . .'¹⁰

With Christ we have an important exception to the normal death and decaying process that affects us all. The Apostle Peter possessing the Holy Spirit as he did, clearly states '*. . . that his soul was not left in hell*'.¹¹

'Hell' literally means the grave, as can be established by checking the Bible references. However, the difference was, that three days after his crucifixion, Christ

⁵Genesis 3.19 ⁶Ecclesiastes 3.19,20 ⁷Psalms 89.48 ⁸Ezekiel 18.4 ⁹Matthew 10.28

¹⁰Acts 2.29,34 ¹¹Acts 2.31

experienced resurrection from the dead. Although his body still bore the marks of that cruel death,¹² he had been changed to immortal nature by God.

True, Christ **then** went to heaven, but as we saw from the very first quotation above, this was not to stay there for ever, but to wait at the right hand of God till the time was ripe for him to come again to the earth.

'And he shall send Jesus Christ . . . whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things . . .'¹³

If all the foregoing is indeed an accurate representation of what the Bible does say about these key doctrines, then the logical question which must inevitably follow is

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH IS THE REWARD FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Once we begin to answer this question and explore the true Bible hope, then we shall finally expose the idea of heaven-going as a man-made theory with no Scriptural foundation.

The Bible tells us that the 'gospel' (good news) message taught by Jesus and the apostles was the good news about the kingdom of God.

'Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.'¹⁴

' . . . I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, for therefore am I sent.'¹⁵

'And he [Paul] went into the synagogue, and spake . . . disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.'¹⁶

The kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven as it is alternatively called) is the name given to the time when Christ shall return to the earth with power, will intervene in world affairs, and begin to rule from Jerusalem.

'And in the days of these Kings shall the God of heaven set up a Kingdom, which shall never be destroyed . . . it shall break in pieces and consume all these Kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.'¹⁷

' . . . there were great voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."¹⁸

' . . . the Lord shall reign over them in mount Zion from henceforth, even for ever . . . the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem.'¹⁹

God does not break his promises. The resurrection and the establishment of God's kingdom will be the way in which God keeps his promise to faithful Abraham.

¹²John 20.27 ¹³Acts 3.20,21 ¹⁴Mark 1.14 ¹⁵Luke 4.43 ¹⁶Acts 19.8 ¹⁷Daniel 2.44
¹⁸Revelation 11.15 ¹⁹Micah 4.7,8

He was told thousands of years ago that he would possess the land of Israel for ever. Here is the New Testament view of whether that has been fulfilled:

'And he [God] gave him [Abraham] none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he *would* give it to him as a possession.'²⁰

'These all [Abraham and others] died in faith, not having received the promise . . . God having provided some better thing for us [the kingdom of God!] that they without us should not be made perfect.'²¹

The reward for all the righteous will be the same as that which God will give to Abraham: eternal life on earth in the kingdom of God.

'The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell therein for ever.'²²

'There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the Kingdom of God.'²³

' . . . seek ye the kingdom of God . . . fear not little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'²⁴

Conversely

'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?'²⁵

A POOR REWARD?

You could be forgiven for thinking that to be given as a reward life on this polluted, war-torn, violent, famine-stricken planet is not much of a reward, even if such life were to go on for ever. But things will be different then. It is often called the kingdom of heaven because it will be a heavenly kingdom on earth, ruled by a king who will come from heaven bringing his reward with him. That is why Jesus taught his followers to pray:

'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.'²⁶

In the kingdom of God, all the world's problems will be sorted out. It is very difficult to conceive of such a state, given the mess it's currently in. Perhaps this selection of verses given by God to encourage his followers in adversity will be of assistance:

'The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom . . . they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God . . . then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy . . . the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.'²⁷

²⁰Acts 7.5 ²¹Hebrews 11.13,40 ²²Psalms 37.29 ²³Luke 13.28,29 ²⁴Luke 12.31,32
²⁵1 Corinthians 6.9 ²⁶Matthew 6.10 ²⁷Isaiah 35 (NIV)

'In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains . . . peoples will stream to it . . . The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig-tree, and no-one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.'²⁸

'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'²⁹

Those who believe in heaven-going can never satisfactorily begin to explain why God should have gone to so much trouble in creating the earth and such a wonderful future for it, if all the good people aren't going to be there anyway!

Hopefully you now agree that there are plenty of good Scriptural reasons why you can't go to heaven. Nor hopefully will you want to.

The passages above depict a reward that appeals to me. I hope it does to you too. '*The last days*' spoken of by Micah in the quotation above, concerns the times in which we live, so we need to ensure we are '*seeking first the kingdom of God.*'

Graeme Tremaine
Horley, Surrey

²⁸Micah 4.1-4 (NIV) ²⁹Revelation 21.1-4 (NIV)

Signs of the Times

‘How can we understand them?’

WHEN JESUS FROM Nazareth was moving around Israel preaching and teaching, he was asked more than once about ‘signs’, sometimes by people who genuinely wanted guidance, and sometimes by evil people who wanted to trap him into saying something wrong! The gospel writer Matthew tells us of one of these incidents when the Pharisees and Sadducees, the leaders of two of the main religious factions in Israel at the time, came to Jesus ‘. . . and testing him asked that he would shew them a sign from heaven.’¹ Now Jesus knew what these cunning men were up to — and his answer was not only a reprimand to them, but a lesson for all who set out to study God’s Word. Jesus talked to them about forecasting tomorrow’s weather — if the sky was red in the evening, they knew tomorrow would probably be a nice day — but if it was red and overcast in the morning — it would more than likely be a stormy day! And this was his rebuke that followed:

‘You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the “signs of the times”. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’²

So here Jesus is telling these religious leaders that the ‘signs of the times’ were there for them to see in God’s Word — but they were blind to them! The ‘sign of Jonah’ was a reference by Jesus to the Old Testament prophecy by Jonah that pointed forward to himself. Jesus had on an earlier occasion told these same group of people about this ‘sign’, saying:

‘For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’³

Jesus pointed out that this was one ‘sign’ given to the Jewish people by God through His prophets but this evil and adulterous generation, apart from a few, could not see it! There in God’s land, talking to them, explaining the Scriptures to

¹Matthew 16.1 (NKJV) ²Matthew 16.2-4 (NKJV) ³Matthew 12.40 (NKJV)

them was the one foretold by all the prophets of God, and yet they did not recognise or understand him; they were blinded by their own prejudices and the false ideas and traditions they had put in place of God's Word!

Now this should be a warning to all who would read and study the Scriptures, because even today we have people such as our present day clergy, who do not accept these 'signs' either! How many times do we read of one or the other of them ridiculing Scriptural records of these events such as the story of 'Jonah and the great fish' — dismissing them as 'Jewish folk lore' and likening them to 'fairy tales'. Indeed we have some of these present day religious leaders even rejecting the virgin birth of Christ and describing his death and resurrection from the dead as a 'conjuring trick'. So perhaps this is the first 'sign' that earnest Bible students may recognise in today's world!

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy telling him that:

'... the "time" will come when they will not endure sound doctrine . . . they . . . will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, . . .'⁴

Here then is a 'sign of *our* times', a state of affairs in religious circles that the faithful of all ages were warned to expect to see in their 'times'. We too in our day should also expect to witness the same and not be at all surprised that these attitudes prevail.

THINGS WE SHOULD BE LOOKING FOR AS 'SIGNS OF THE TIMES'

In a way the same problem exists today as existed in Christ's days on earth. We have noted already how the religious leaders and teachers were not looking for or were not aware of the 'sign' given to them concerning Christ in their own sacred Scriptures. The reason for this we are told was that they had changed the commands of God for their own ideas. '*For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men.*'⁵ The same principle applies today — if the God-given doctrines in His Word are changed, or substituted, by men, then it is obvious that people will not know what 'signs' to look for! So we have to get back to the true beliefs of the Old Testament Scriptures and the beliefs of the 1st century followers of Jesus, to be able to see and understand the 'signs of the times'.

The primary belief in the 1st century was in the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel and the fulfilment of the promises to the fathers of Israel. This was the fundamental hope of the 1st century believers as set out very clearly by the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) in his masterly review entitled 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'.

⁴II Timothy 4.3,4 (NKJV) ⁵Mark 7.8 (NKJV)

He wrote:

'It was universally believed that the end of the world and the kingdom of heaven were at hand. The near approach of this wonderful event had been predicted by the Apostles; the tradition of it was preserved by their earliest disciples; and those who understood in their literal sense the discourses of Christ himself were obliged to expect the second and glorious coming of the Son of Man . . .'⁶

Here then is an independent testimony to the real hope of the early believers, but as Gibbon goes on to explain, this vital belief was later rejected by the church and is now classified by some theologians as heresy!

The point here is that if the teaching of Christ himself concerning his 'second coming' and the 'restoration of the kingdom of Israel' has been rejected by the religious leaders over the centuries up to our days, then they — like those Pharisees and Sadducees — do not know what 'signs' to look for because they do not believe it anyway!

WHAT DID JESUS TELL HIS DISCIPLES TO LOOK FOR?

We find in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles that Jesus, after his resurrection, spent '*. . . forty days . . . speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.*'⁷ Now these disciples after this period of nearly six weeks' discussion with Jesus were expecting things to happen and so they put the question to Jesus; '*Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?*'⁸ Based upon what Christ had been telling them, their response was understandable. The things pertaining to the Kingdom of God quite clearly concerned the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. It is hardly likely that after 40 days of talking with Jesus they had grasped the wrong idea — in fact the reaction of Jesus to their question was not a rebuke; he told them plainly '*It is not for you to know "times" or "seasons" which the Father has put in his own authority.*'⁹

They were not wrong in their expectation; it was all a matter of timing and that was in God's hands! The Almighty will decide the 'time' and the 'season' for the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel according to His purpose.

So what were the disciples to do now? They were promised the power of God, the Holy Spirit, and were commanded to go out and preach — '*. . . be witnesses to me in Jerusalem . . . and to the end of the earth.*'¹⁰ Now suddenly Jesus, after speaking to them, was taken up into heaven but they were not left wondering; they were told very clearly by two angels that Jesus would come again:

'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.'¹¹

⁶Page 276 *The Portable Gibbon: Penguin Books Ltd* ⁷Acts 1.4 (NKJV) ⁸Acts 1.6 (NKJV)
⁹Acts 1.7 (NKJV) ¹⁰Acts 1.8 (NKJV) ¹¹Acts 1.11 (NKJV)

So the clear teaching of God's Word is that the disciples of Christ were to look for the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel and the second coming of Christ. And that is just what they taught everybody to make their hope and expectation.

It is 'SIGNS' of these events that the true followers of Jesus have been looking for ever since! It may be that some believers in the 1st century were a little premature in their hopes, but these close disciples would have remembered the words of Christ before his death and resurrection. They had been told by Jesus that the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed¹² (a prophecy that was fulfilled by the Roman General Titus in AD 70).

WHEN WILL THESE THINGS BE?

But we note how the disciples questioned Jesus — '*And they asked him, saying, Teacher, but when will these things be? and what "sign" will there be when these things are about to take place?*'¹³ Jesus then told them of wars and persecution and also of false Messiahs — but one point he emphasised was that many things had to happen after the destruction of Herod's Temple, events covering a long period of time: '*But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately.*'¹⁴ There was to be an interval of time before the end. A clue to the length of that 'time' was given by Jesus later in this prophecy: Jerusalem, not just the Temple, was to be destroyed.

They were told by Jesus:

'But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near . . . For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled . . . and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.'¹⁵

Here we see those disciples had asked for 'signs' and Jesus gave them clear 'signs' and 'times', focussed on Jerusalem and the Jewish people!

The Roman armies came and besieged Jerusalem and destroyed it; the people were sold as slaves all over the Roman Empire and Jerusalem came under Gentile domination from then onwards. From that time forward, the true followers of Christ have been looking for the fulfilment of this 'sign'. Centuries passed and the land of Israel was in the hands of successive occupiers, including the British Empire; and here is where the whole situation in our days becomes exciting because, those who have been looking for and studying the 'signs' given in God's Word, have seen a sudden fulfilment of Christ's prophecy! After much agony for this people, a State of Israel was declared in May 1948 but half of Jerusalem was still occupied until 1967 when the Six-Day War left all of Jerusalem in Jewish hands!

¹²Luke 21.5 (NKJV) ¹³Luke 21.7 (NKJV) ¹⁴Luke 21.9 (NKJV) ¹⁵Luke 21.20-24 (NKJV)

Here we have 'SIGNS' of great importance for all believers — here is a 'SIGN' and here is the 'TIME'! And all this was linked by Jesus to his Second Coming!

He told us:

'And there will be SIGNS in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars [symbols of the ruling political powers] and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven [ruling powers again] will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.'¹⁶

The 'SIGNS' of the nearness of the Second Coming of Christ are so obvious to all who study God's Word. It means that everything that happens to, or that affects this tiny nation of Israel, must be viewed with great interest by those who look for the return of Jesus! Anything that takes place in the world that has any connection with God's people Israel, could be a 'sign' of Christ's return.

THE 'SIGN' OF ISRAEL

There are of course other prophecies in the Bible, apart from the words of Jesus, that give us clues as to what to look for. An example is some of the prophecies of Ezekiel in chapters 36-39. A close study of these chapters reveals to us that God stated, long ago, His intention to restore His people to their own land, '*For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.*'¹⁷ These chapters too, have provided the true believers in every age with 'signs' to look for!

Chapter 37 is a vision of the dry bones of Israel coming to life; of sinews and flesh and then breath coming to these rebuilt bodies and the whole multitude standing again as a nation! The vision describes the Jewish people despite being persecuted and massacred over the centuries, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust, but surviving and being reborn as a nation! For the Bible student here is a clear 'sign' to look for. The revival of the Jewish people meant everything to them and so when resettlement in the land began following persecution (pogroms) in Russia in the 1800s, followers of Biblical 'signs' were alerted and watched it gathering pace. Theodore Herzl (1860-1904) and other prominent Jews began a Zionist movement¹⁸ which ended with the Jews established in their own land! To those who have been watching these things, it has meant the beginning of the realisation of their hopes. But those 'watchers' know that the prophecies do not end there.

THE INVASION OF ISRAEL FORETOLD

If we look at Ezekiel ch 38 the prophet foretells that this newly-formed nation of Israel will be threatened by a northern invader and other closer neighbours,

¹⁶Luke 21.25-27 (NKJV) ¹⁷Ezekiel 36.24 (NKJV) ¹⁸A belief in the need to establish an autonomous Jewish home in Palestine.

Libya and Persia (Iran)¹⁹, and so the 'Signs' we should be looking for NOW, in relation to Israel, concern threats of attack from the northern neighbours of Israel and their allies.

The prophecy tells us not only of a threat but an eventual invasion and defeat of this newly-formed nation. So we must be looking for 'signs' that warn us that this attack on Israel is likely to happen.

It is a fact that Russia, since the time of Peter the Great, has had designs on the Middle East and Persian Gulf areas. This threat has been at the forefront of the strategies of the other major powers of the world such as the British Empire when in control of that area and now to a lesser degree, Britain with a more involved superpower, the USA. Many times in recent decades we have seen the USSR trying to establish a political and military foothold in the area surrounding Israel by heavy commitment to Israel's enemies, such as Syria and Egypt.

As Israel was plunged into war at various times by the connivance of the now defunct USSR with these nations, Bible students and watchers of the 'signs' thought that the 'time' had possibly arrived. The last conflict in the region, the Gulf War, alerted us all again but that had no visible effect on Israel's position. But what it did do, was to take a confederacy of nations back into the area 'south' of Israel in a defence, primarily of Kuwait but ultimately of Israel! And so we are seeing a fulfilment of this Ezekiel ch 38 prophecy, where we not only have a 'northern' confederacy described but also a 'southern' confederacy²⁰ who show resistance to this threatened desolation of Israel.

There are some, even among the watchers of the 'signs', who have possibly ruled our Russia as the leader of the northern group of states following the collapse of the USSR. However, the emergence of a very unstable Commonwealth of Independent States, still armed with many nuclear weapons, and still producing weapons of war, leaves room for Russia, *'the prince of Rosh [Rus]'*²¹ of Ezekiel ch 38, to lead this attack on Israel. The sudden rise for example of the neo-fascist Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky has again alerted us to the fact that God moves mysteriously among the nations:

'He changes the times and the seasons: He removes kings and raises up kings.'²²

The prophet Daniel also tells us:

'That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever he will, and sets over it the lowest of men.'²³

An example of this is seen today in the fact that this man Zhirinovsky now leads the party with the most votes in the new Russian Parliament! His uprising has drawn parallels between him and Adolf Hitler in Germany in the early 1930's. Zhirinovsky

¹⁹Ezekiel 38.1-15 (NKJV) ²⁰Ezekiel 38.13 (NKJV) ²¹Ezekiel 38.2 (NKJV)

²²Daniel 2.21 (NKJV) ²³Daniel 4.17 (NKJV)

has the same sort of talents as Hitler. He appeals to a nation that has lost its superpower status, when he promises to restore its power and glory! Like Hitler he blames the Jews for Russia's problems and like Hitler he makes no secret of wanting to expand his country's borders.

He has even written a book, reminiscent of Hitler's '*Mein Kampf*', where he says:

'The leap south is not only a solution to Russia's internal problems . . . it is also the solution of a world task. How I dream of our Russian soldiers washing their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. The pealing bells from a Russian Orthodox Church on the shores of the Indian Ocean or Mediterranean would proclaim to the peoples of this region peace, prosperity and calm.'²⁴

This man and his wild statements may be regarded a joke by many but so was Hitler! And history shows how easily men of this nature have come to power in the past and wrought havoc among the nations. In a time of Russia's political and economic turmoil anything can happen, so we must watch the 'signs' there very closely!

WHAT OTHER SIGNS ARE THERE TO LOOK FOR?

Jesus also foretold the state the world would be in just prior to his second coming. We could describe the message he gave as the 'SIGN OF NOAH'. In Matthew's gospel record we find again those disciples of Jesus saying to him '*Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the "sign" of your "coming" and of the "end of the age?"*'²⁵ Jesus gives them in reply a number of things to think about, but this 'sign of Noah' must be considered by his latter day disciples:

'But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.'²⁶

Jesus is saying to those looking for his return, '*Have a think about the state the world was in prior to the Flood, and that is how it will be just before I come again!*'

So what were conditions like in this period of man's history? A look back to the book of Genesis, to chapter 6, tells us all we need to know of this 'sign'. We find words like this:

'The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually . . . The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.'²⁷

So Jesus is directing our minds, to the social condition of the world — the patterns of human behaviour. The key words in this description of the 'times' of

²⁴*The Last Leap South, 1993* ²⁵Matthew 24.3 (NKJV) ²⁶Matthew 24.37-39 (NKJV)

²⁷Genesis 6.5,11

Noah are 'wickedness', 'evil', 'corrupt' and 'violence': and these words put together in their collective meanings, summarise the social conditions of the world we live in today — an evil, violent, corrupt world that is far removed for the most part, from God.

Our children are being persuaded to feed on a diet of drugs, pornography, sexual licence and without moral guidance that leads to further violence and deviant practices. All of these are reminiscent of the state of affairs in a world that God destroyed. The danger here for Bible students is that the 'SIGN of NOAH', put forward so emphatically by Jesus, is also dismissed by our modern day religious leaders as another bit of ancient Jewish folk lore.

That close disciple of Jesus, Simon Peter, reminded the 1st Century believers about Noah in both his letters, so he believed it! The lessons of Noah's 'times' were very real and very important to Peter and his letters show that these lessons must be just as real and important to us today as a 'sign of the times' — they cannot be ignored! Peter says '*God . . . did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly.*'²⁸

The people of Noah's time were in the same frame of mind as most people are today: the reference by Jesus to the fact that they were '*eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage*' means firstly that they were so preoccupied with their daily affairs that they had no time for this strange man Noah and his preaching about a coming flood! How similar that is to our days, when the majority of people have materialistic aims, ridicule religion and anyone who holds to moral or ethical values.

The words of Christ about '*marrying and giving in marriage*' could of course be a reference to the words in Genesis 6 that '*they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose.*'²⁹ Was Jesus pointing out a 'sign' of the breakdown in our days also of the lasting quality of the institution of marriage, the trend towards adultery, divorce and remarriage, with the resultant problems of broken families and children? Or was he pointing to the wanton disregard of the need for marriage at all that is the fashion today?

These then are some of the 'signs' given to us by God in His Word. Do not let us make the mistake of ignoring them!

Peter warned us to:

' . . . be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour, knowing this first, that scoffers will come in the "last days" walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming?" . . .'³⁰

²⁸II Peter 2.5 (NKJV) ²⁹Genesis 6.2 (NKJV) ³⁰II Peter 3.2-4 (NKJV)

Christ will not return, says Dr Jenkins

By Damian Thompson, Religious Affairs Correspondent

THE Bishop of Durham, Dr David Jenkins, has ignited a new row in the Church of England by claiming there is no such thing as eternal damnation or the Second Coming of Christ.

It emerged yesterday that Dr Jenkins, speaking at a recent conference for Anglican lay readers, went further than ever before in challenging orthodox Christian doctrines. "I am clear that there can be no Hell for eternity — our God could not be so cruel," he said.

"However, I think for some people who have wasted every opportunity for redemption, there may be extinction... I do not think it possible to believe any longer in a literal Second Coming or the end of the world."

His comments were condemned last night by the Rt Rev Noel Jones, Bishop of Sodor and Man, who accused Dr Jenkins of "undermining one of the central tenets of Christianity".

He said: "Belief in a Second Coming is one of the

prime statements of the faith."

The latest outburst by Dr Jenkins, who retires next year, will ensure that his career ends as controversially as it began. In 1984, shortly after his consecration, he caused outrage by using the phrase "conjuring trick with bones" in a discussion about the Resurrection.

He also expressed doubts about the Virgin Birth and claimed it was not necessary to believe in the divinity of Christ to be called a Christian. Thousands of traditionalists petitioned against his consecration, and when York Minster was struck by lightning there was much talk of divine intervention.

In a book published last month, the Archbishop of York, Dr Habgood, strongly defended Dr Jenkins.

"He has said nothing which would have surprised or shocked his fellow theologians," he wrote. "In raising questions about the stories in which these fundamental doctrines are expressed, he has done no more than every theological student is required to do."

The Rt Rev David Lunn, Bishop of Sheffield, accused Dr Jenkins last night of making "unhelpful" comments. "The Church may not require us to believe in the physical torments associated with Hell, but that is not the same as saying it does not exist," he said.

(by permission)

Channel Islands: 50p (65p Sat)



In the newspaper article overleaf could we have a more clear 'sign'? Here is a notable scoffer fulfilling Peter's words in no uncertain manner!

But Peter tells us:

'For this they wilfully forget . . . the world [of Noah] that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment . . . do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord a day is as a thousand years.'³¹

The scoffer may pour ridicule and scorn on these words of God but this is emphasising to the true believer the reality of the 'signs' we have been given.

YOUR REDEMPTION DRAWS NEAR³²

All the signs we have mentioned in this article, end on the same consistent theme of the coming judgments by God on an evil world: Ezekiel's 'sign' of the Northern confederacy, invading and destroying the nation of Israel in the '*latter years*',³³ ends with God's judgments on them:

'I will bring him to judgment with pestilence and bloodshed; I will rain down on him, on his troops and on the many peoples who are with him, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire and brimstone. Thus will I magnify myself and sanctify myself, and I will be known in the eyes of many nations. Then shall they know that I am the Lord.'³⁴

This 'sign' of Ezekiel tells us very clearly the purpose of God with His people Israel. Peter's warning 'signs' have the same end result, but he tells us that God '*. . . is longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*'.³⁵ Now is our time of opportunity, Peter urges us. If we heed the 'signs' we have time in God's mercy to make our peace with our Creator and wait for the coming of Jesus.

Peter uses similar words to Jesus as a final reminder:

'But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night . . .'³⁶

Jesus said:

'For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth.'³⁷

The warnings are clear, aren't they? Thieves come without letting us know! Animals are snared and trapped as they are happily going about their daily habits — and this is how the return of Christ to the earth will be for those who are not expecting it! Jesus ended his prophecy by saying to his disciples:

'Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.'³⁸

The SIGNS are there — let us heed them. Ignore the 'scoffers' — be a 'watcher' of the SIGNS of the TIMES.

Ken Dennis
Dartford

³¹II Peter 3.5-8 (NKJV) ³²Luke 21.28 (NKJV) ³³Ezekiel 38.8,16 (NKJV)

³⁴Ezekiel 38.20-23 (NKJV) ³⁵II Peter 3.9 (NKJV) ³⁶II Peter 3.10 (NKJV)

³⁷Luke 21.35 (NKJV) ³⁸Luke 21.36 (NKJV)

Incline Thine Ear Unto Wisdom

‘Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might’

THROUGHOUT HISTORY SUCCESSFUL men and women have displayed enthusiasm for their cause and dedication to their work. Their zeal and drive are seen as one of the keys to their success. The object of their diligent commitment can often become their whole life, to the virtual exclusion of other interests and activities.

Whether in the fields of politics, business, welfare or religion, dedicated people are frequently achievers. They have discovered the wisdom and the benefits that derive from putting all their energy and effort into the task before them. Often unknowingly, they demonstrate the wisdom and the truth of the words of Solomon, that we find in the Bible, in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

GOOD ADVICE FOR ALL

Consider the wide advice in the quotation from Ecclesiastes which forms the title of this article:

‘Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.’¹

This is advice that relates to real life in every generation and every circumstance. We have a choice in our approach and attitude to whatever we do. Either we can put our best effort into it and work at it to achieve the objective, or we can neglect its demands, being lazy, slothful, looking for short cuts, remaining unenthusiastic and uncommitted.

¹*Ecclesiastes 9.10*

We do not have to be well known, prominent or famous to apply this wisdom and enjoy its benefits in our lives today.

LIFE'S EXPERIENCES CONFIRM GOD'S WISDOM

Read through any of the chapters in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and you will find they reflect in some way or other your own experience. This is because they are not just man's reflection on life, but the advice of the Creator himself who knows all about human nature and how different people think and react.

Although these collections of sayings were brought together by men like Solomon and Hezekiah, there is every good reason to believe they were inspired by God and are a fundamental and useful part of the Holy Scriptures. And so while the Psalms show how we should relate to God, the Proverbs particularly offer excellent advice concerning our dealings with our fellow men and women.

The Holy Scriptures, the Apostle Paul tells us, are able to make you '*wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*'

Paul wrote:

'All Scripture, is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.'²

These same Holy Scriptures are full of wisdom and good advice to direct our lives today in both mundane and spiritual matters.

OUR DAILY WORK

Consider first, the work we do every day. Most of us have to work to earn a living. Indeed, the Bible condemns those who are slothful and lazy when there is work available.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the early Christians:

'... We commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.'³

Most of us will work under foremen, overseers or managers, and the Apostle Paul clearly sets out the Divine wisdom as to how we should do our daily work as servants to our masters:

²II Timothy 3.15-17 (NKJV) ³II Thessalonians 3.10-12 (NKJV)

'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything and do it, not only when their eye is on you, and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, WORK AT IT WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AS WORKING FOR THE LORD, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.'⁴

There are many examples in the Bible of diligent men and women — Joseph the administrator, who served the Pharaoh of Egypt,⁵ Jacob, who served Laban faithfully although Laban cheated him⁶; David, who played his harp for Saul, although Saul tried to kill him,⁷ and Ruth the Moabitess, who totally committed herself to her Jewish mother in law.⁸

ZEAL IN GOD'S SERVICE

The wisdom we have just considered in relation to our daily work, applies to an even greater extent as we now consider the work of serving our God to the very best of our ability.

The Bible clearly says:

'He that cometh to God must believe that he . . . is a rewarder of them that DILIGENTLY seek Him.'⁹

On one occasion, Jesus was asked the vital question, '*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*' His reply confirmed the Old Testament principle:

'You shall love the Lord your God WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, and your neighbour as yourself.'¹⁰

Jesus illustrated that wisdom by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. We note the diligence and the commitment of the Samaritan, who did all he could for the wounded traveller. Then Jesus added this advice: '*Go and do likewise*'.¹¹

In practical everyday terms, diligence in our worship of God and in serving others is emphasised throughout the Scriptures. One example is found in the letter to the Hebrews:

'God is not unjust; He will not forget your word and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.'¹²

⁴Colossians 3.22-24 (NIV) ⁵Genesis 40.41 ⁶Genesis 29.30 ⁷I Samuel 16.16-18 ⁸Ruth 1

⁹Hebrews 11.6 ¹⁰Luke 10.27 (NKJV) from Deut 6.5 ¹¹Luke 10.37 (NKJV)

¹²Hebrews 6.10-12 (NIV)

There are many men and women portrayed in the Scriptures, whose zeal and enthusiasm characterised their service to God. King Hezekiah in the Old Testament did all the work in the service of his God *'with all his heart and prospered'*. Apollos in the New Testament was eloquent and *'mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit and taught diligently the things of the Lord.'* The Apostle Paul, at first in this persecution of the followers of Jesus, turned, and later directed his energies to serving the early christian church, *'counting all things but loss that he might press on to the goal of his calling of God in Christ Jesus.'*

Jesus himself, of course, is the supreme and perfect example, who did everything in his life *'with all his might'*. The prophet Isaiah had predicted that the Christ would *'wrap himself in zeal as in a cloak.'*¹³

Those who saw the effects of his healing hand and heard his wise words declared: *'He has done all things well'*. His life of absolute dedication and untiring effort in healing and preaching, culminated in an act of the greatest spiritual strength in giving his life for God's work.

There never has been such an example of zeal and total commitment to a cause, as that seen in the life and death of Jesus. He calls upon his followers of all ages to dedicate their lives to his service and to try to use all their energy and resources to keep his commandments, seeking, as a first priority, the Kingdom of God. Neglect and laziness should find no part in the life of anyone called to the great hope of the Gospel. Our commitment is useless if it is half-hearted — if only part of our might, our hearts and our minds are used in our service to God. Other interests and involvements will get in the way and weaken our efforts if we are not careful.

We cannot serve God and also serve our own desires. Jesus said:

*'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me . . . for what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and is himself destroyed or lost?'*¹⁴

He also encourages us not to give up or be discouraged:

*'No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.'*¹⁵

However, our zeal must be directed in the right way and must not become a blind enthusiasm for any sort of religion. We must come to learn God's ways, or we may find ourselves devoting our efforts and our might in the wrong direction. Paul said of many of the dedicated Jews of his day:

*'They have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.'*¹⁶

¹³Isaiah 59.17 (NIV) ¹⁴Luke 9.23.25 (NKJV) ¹⁵Luke 9.62 ¹⁶Romans 10.2,3

TIME AND OPPORTUNITY ARE LIMITED

If we look again at the content of our quotation from Ecclesiastes, we shall realise just WHY we need to put all our effort into our lives and not just drift along, hoping for something better tomorrow.

'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device [no planning NIV] nor knowledge, nor wisdom IN THE GRAVE, WHITHER THOU GOEST.'¹⁷

None of us knows when we are going to die. It may be as a result of natural processes or some tragic accident. This means that we do not know how many days or years we may have left to put our lives in order. Now is the time of opportunity to put our best effort into what we do, particularly in our spiritual lives before God.

It is of no use waiting for tomorrow to come. It will then be too late to dedicate ourselves to the service of God in the way He has directed. The Bible often speaks of life as a race, with the gift of eternal life held out as a reward by the grace of God. We do not know when for us, that race will end. It is therefore our wisdom to do all in our power to live up to God's requirements in this race, while we are still alive.

We are often tempted to put off until tomorrow some decision or action we could carry out today, only to find that we never get around to doing it. Putting things off until later without good reason is not using our hands with all their might and strength:

'Wake up O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Be very careful then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.'¹⁸

BENEFITS NOW AND LATER

We have already noted that many dedicated and committed men and women reach positions of trust and responsibility, as a result, to a certain extent, of their zeal and effort. But we are more concerned with the reward that God holds for those who diligently seek Him. Some were famous in their day, others insignificant; but they all looked forward to their reward in the Kingdom of God, with eternal life as their goal. This great hope provided them with the incentive to endure many setbacks, while keeping their hands to the plough and striving persistently to do their best for God who had promised to reward them.

Our wisdom is to follow their example and persist in our efforts to do God's will and to do it willingly, enthusiastically, with all our heart and mind. If we are still alive when Jesus returns to establish God's kingdom, may we be found working hard in his service, watching for him. Should we die, we can look forward to his promise of resurrection from the dead.

¹⁷Ecclesiastes 9.10 ¹⁸Ephesians 5.14-17 (NIV)

After confirming the great hope of resurrection, the Apostle Paul gives us some very confident and encouraging words of wisdom:

'Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. ALWAYS GIVE YOURSELF FULLY TO THE WORK OF THE LORD, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.'¹⁹

The Creator has put into the hands of each one of us the power and ability to achieve great things if we try to follow the Divine precepts.

If we do this, God will bless all our work and our efforts to live our lives with a zeal and enthusiasm for the great hope He has promised to fulfil.

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¹⁹1 Corinthians 15.58 (NIV)

COVER PICTURE

The Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, has been the focus of pilgrimage throughout the centuries since the crucifixion of Jesus. That event of some two thousand years ago, with the impact of that unselfish act of supreme sacrifice being the means by which thousands of believers have re-enforced their faith and re-dedicated themselves to the service of God.

As we go to press, we have witnessed another pilgrimage, this time to the coasts of France, as thousands of veterans of the second world war re-visited the various sites in homage to comrades who gave their lives, in order that others might live.

This 'celebration' of such a high price paid by those thousands of men and women, can hardly be compared to that singular act of self sacrifice by Jesus of Nazareth. The tyrants and corrupt priesthood of those far off days put the Son of God to death, not because he promoted aggression, but peace. He did not die by accident or misfortune but by a willing act of obedience to his God.

As a result, those who identify with his example, his teachings and his sacrifice remember him not annually, or in a 50th anniversary celebration, but weekly. In a simple service of remembrance it is not his death that forms the pinnacle of hope for those who understand the purpose of that act, but his resurrection to life.

By this great truth, he demonstrated not the corruptible end of man's temporal being, but the gift that God has offered to all mankind, even life eternal. For truly is it written, *'But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.'*¹

¹1 Corinthians 15.20.

YOUR LETTERS

From time to time we receive letters which raise questions that are certain to have arisen in many of our readers minds.

In a recent letter, a reader commented that there are many references to 'Satan' in the New Testament but in discussion with Christadelphians about this subject, he was given to understand we claim that 'he' (Satan) does not exist! Our correspondent goes on to say that 'he is confused'.

We are sure that many who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will have found similar difficulties when basing their understanding on current theology, which advocates that 'Satan' is a person and as our reader says, 'He', being an evil influence abroad in the earth.

'Satan' is a Hebrew word which has been left untranslated in our English Bible. It literally means 'an adversary' or 'accuser'. In fact it appears 13 times in the Old Testament and 36 times in the New Testament. In every case it refers to man himself. Consider the words of James — '*But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*'¹

Sin is the characteristic of human nature which, to please God, we must overcome by subduing those 'natural tendencies' which are contrary to His teaching.

For instance, Paul wrote to the Romans:

'I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do — no, the evil I do not want to do; this I keep on doing.'²

That is why Jesus was a man, who like us, was born in the flesh of human nature. This was so that he would endure the same struggle against sin as we ourselves.

Paul wrote to the Jews:

'Wherefore in all things it behoved him [Jesus] to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.'³

Why?, we might ask:

'For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour [come to the help of] them that are tempted.'³

¹James 1.14 ²Romans 7.18,19 (NIV) ³Hebrews 2.17,18

Jesus perfectly overcame the struggle against his human nature under the curse of sin, so that when he was put to death, God raised him to eternal life, for being sinless, he could not see corruption in the grave.

The Scriptures make it plain then, that the adversary, Satan, is in fact in every one of us, wanting to do what is 'natural' or in our nature. But the followers of Christ are those that try to suppress their 'human nature' and strive to do God's will in an endeavour to attain to that gift promised by God, eternal life.

There are many passages in Scripture that show that 'Satan' and 'the devil' are the outworking of our natural human characteristics. To see that Jesus and ourselves shared this nature read Hebrews 2.14,15. This makes it clear that the 'power of death' is the 'devil', which is simply 'sin in the flesh'. (See also Romans 5.21; 6.23; James 1.13-15 and 1 Corinthians 15.56).

By the perfect offering of himself as a sacrifice, a representative of mankind, Jesus opened the way of reconciliation.

'But now once, in the end of the world [age, as it means] hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.'⁴

The result of this supreme act of love to all who would believe and follow him is:

'So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin, unto salvation.'⁵

May this be our reward, when all God's faithful servants shall see Jesus once again on the earth, and will be granted that great gift of life.

Peter Webb
Correspondence Secretary

⁴Hebrews 9.26 ⁵Hebrews 9.28

(Editor's Note: See Volume 13 Number 9, May/June 1994 issue for a more comprehensive study of the subject — *The Devil and Satan*)